

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 14, 2013

**TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY REGIONAL PARK TRAILS PROJECT:
SOUTHWEST TRAILS**

Project No. 12-013-02

Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,500,000 to the County of San Diego for trail construction to implement the Tijuana River Valley Trail System in San Diego County.

LOCATION: Tijuana River Valley Regional Park, San Diego, San Diego County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Trails and Habitat Enhancement Project Environmental Impact Report](#)

Exhibit 4: [Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program](#)

Exhibit 5: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million five hundred thousand dollars (\$1,500,000) to the County of San Diego (County) for trail construction as part of the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Trail System, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of trail construction funds, the County shall submit for the review and approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer:
 - a. A final design plan, project work program, budget, and timeline.

- b. The names of any contractors that the County will retain to carry out all or part of the project.
 - c. A signing plan that acknowledges Conservancy funding.
 - d. Documentation that the County has obtained all permits and approvals required for the project.
2. In carrying out the project, the County shall comply with all applicable mitigation and monitoring measures for the project that are identified in the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Trails and Habitat Enhancement Project Environmental Impact Report adopted by the County on December 13, 2006, and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the November 10, 2011 Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 *et seq*) regarding a system of public accessways.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Trails and Habitat Enhancement Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR) adopted by the County on December 13, 2006 , attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3 and finds that the project, as mitigated, avoids, reduces or mitigates possible significant environmental effects and that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.
4. The proposed project serves greater than local need.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$1,500,000 to the County of San Diego, Department of Parks and Recreation (County) to construct trails as part of the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park (TRVRP) Trail System. The proposed project would improve three existing unofficial paths, which together add more than 6 miles out of 22 miles of proposed trails within the TRVRP Trail System. Once improved, the trails will enhance the continuity of the greater trail system of the Tijuana River Valley and provide residents of the communities of San Ysidro and Nestor with non-vehicular access opportunities to connect to the west with Border Fields State Park, the Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve, the California Coastal Trail and the Bayshore Bikeway. Connectivity to these trails will allow hikers and equestrians to travel over five miles within the Tijuana River Valley and all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

TRVRP is a premier recreational resource; however, it is underutilized and underappreciated. Balancing the recreation and preservation needs of the community is one of the primary goals of the County for TRVRP. The approved trail system design integrates passive recreational uses into the habitat preserve in a sustainable manner.

The proposed trail will be located along an existing unimproved path, which ranges in width from two to eight feet. The proposed trail will have a tread width of four to six feet and is a multi-use, equestrian type trail, designed for use by pedestrians, equestrians and bikes. The new construction will adhere to topographical contours and grades minimized to follow existing topography with a maximum 5% slope for the entire trail. All trails will be graded to provide positive sheet flow for storm drainage and will be developed to avoid sensitive habitat and have no adverse visual impacts on the surrounding community. There will be signage to clearly mark off limit areas to protect sensitive habitats, as well as to encourage users to stay on the trail. Trail construction materials will be native soils and decomposed granite and informal trails not part of the new trail alignment will be closed, fenced and restored to native habitat.

The County, through its Department of Parks and Recreation, maintains and enhances the quality of life in San Diego County by providing parks and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors. Their award winning parks system includes local and regional parks, campgrounds, 300 miles of trails, fishing lakes, state-of-the-art recreation centers and sports complexes, ecological preserves, and open space preserves.

Site Description: The TRVRP measures approximately 1,800 acres and is located south of Imperial Beach and southern neighborhoods of the City of San Diego and just north of the Border Highlands and the international border. Located west of Interstate 5, the County Park is entirely within the coastal zone and adjoins Border Field State Park and Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge on the west. Though degraded by human activity, the valley's natural resources are among the most valued in San Diego County, largely because of the contiguous assemblage of habitats that extend east from the beach to the urban areas along Interstate 5. Among them are sand dune, saltmarsh, riparian lowlands, and coastal sage scrub upland. With much of the region's endemic habitat lost, each of the remnant habitats that exist in the valley are rare and support numerous state and federal listed plants, birds, insects, and reptiles. Extensive urban development has occurred in southwestern San Diego County, promising to bring a large increase in use of the Tijuana River Valley public lands.

The proposed trails will be located in the southwestern area of the park, accessible by Monument Rd, Hollister St., and Saturn Blvd.

The adjacent habitat is comprised of primarily riparian mule fat scrub with occasional willows. Parts of the trail have been victimized by illegal dumping and any debris uncovered during construction will be removed.

The proposed trail is part of the larger TRVRP. The County has acquired over 1700 acres for the development of this regional park. The park plan proposes over 22-miles of trails, an equestrian center, and active recreation complex and community park amenities. This project will be one component of the regional park. The TRVRP is adjacent to the densely populated communities of San Ysidro, Nestor and Tijuana, Mexico. The site is accessible through public transportation, walking, biking and equestrian trails.

TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY REGIONAL PARK TRAILS PROJECT: SOUTHWEST TRAILS

Project History: In 2003, the Conservancy authorized a grant of \$1,000,000 to the County to design and evaluate the environmental benefits and impacts of an integrated program of habitat restoration and public access improvements in the 2000-acre portion of the TRVRP that lies immediately adjacent to the Tijuana Estuary. The County approved the "Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Trails and Habitat Enhancement Plan & Final Environmental Impact Report" (See Exhibit 3) in December 2006 and is implementing the Plan over the next several years.

In 2012, the Conservancy authorized a grant of \$450,000 to implement a trail project at the eastern extent of the park, near Dairy Mart Rd. The County has received prior funding totaling more than \$1,200,000 for additional trails projects in TRVRP, including an American River Parkways grant for \$612,000. This project will help to complete the portion of the trails network located on the valley floor.

Despite a history of habitat destruction and neglect, there is great potential for restoration of riparian and coastal sage scrub habitats in the Tijuana River Valley and the project area still supports populations of several state and federally-listed threatened and endangered species. There is also potential for completing both the southernmost section of the California Coastal Trail and a trail linkage from rapidly-developing inland communities to the coast.

The project area is included in the Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Subarea Plan adopted by the City of San Diego in the context of the county-wide Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP). The County used Conservancy funds to complete the detailed planning needed to set the stage for fully restoring the valuable habitat in close consultation with the parties involved in the MSCP, including the City, and state and federal resource and regulatory agencies, as well as other stakeholders. The County has also identified alignments for the California Coastal Trail, the inland linkage to the coast, and other park trails that would best serve recreational uses while also protecting wildlife habitat.

This project involves the implementation of discrete portions of the TRVRP Trails and Habitat Enhancement Plan and connects other trail portions that have been implemented using other funding sources.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	1,500,000.0
San Diego County General Funds	<u>480,000.0</u>

Total Project Costs	1,980,000.0
----------------------------	-------------

The expected source of funds for this project is the FY 2010/2011 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Fund, Public Resources Code section 75001 *et seq.* (Proposition 84). This funding may be expended, consistent with the Conservancy's enabling statutes, for the protection and enjoyment of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds as specified in Section 75060(f) of the Public Resources Code. Proposition 84 defines protection activities to include actions "necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources". (Pub. Res. Code § 75005(m)). As specified in Section 75072.6, "San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds" includes the coastal and bay watersheds within San Diego County, such as the Tijuana River Watershed.

The project is undertaken consistent with Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling statute, as discussed below. Upon completion, the County will contribute staff time for the maintenance of the trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31410, which directs the Conservancy to take a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The project is consistent with Section 31400.1, which authorizes the Conservancy to award access development grants to any public agency, provided that the resulting public accessways will serve more than local public needs. The Tijuana River Valley Regional Park Trail, when completed, will provide access to the coast for several inland communities as well as other state-wide visitors.

Section 31400.2 authorizes the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of the initial development of a public accessway by any public agency, and the amount of funding provided by the conservancy shall be determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy. Consistent with this section, the proposed amount of the Conservancy contribution was determined based on the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for public access projects and the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, including project urgency (See Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines).

Consistent with Section 31400.3, the project would aid the County in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. This trail project will provide a link needed for existing trails within Tijuana River Valley Regional Park to connect to the west with the City of Imperial Beach, forming an integral link to the South San Diego Bay coastal area of the City of San Diego and City of Coronado via the Bayshore Bikeway, which serves as a segment of the regional and statewide California Coastal Trail.

Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The County is a public agency which owns the land comprising the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park on which the trail project traverses and eventually connects to the California Coastal Trail and is thus eligible for Conservancy assistance under this section.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 2E** of the Conservancy's 2013 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would provide a design for a regional trail that connects inland populations to the coast.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 2F** of the Conservancy's 2013 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would implement a project that connects inland populations to the coast.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on November 10, 2011, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The San Diego County Board of Supervisors, the Cities of Chula Vista and San Diego, and the residents of the neighboring communities fully support this project. The San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation is working with the communities of Nestor, San Diego and San Ysidro to expand non-motorized recreational trail opportunities within their boundaries. Continued urbanization and development has increased the need for outdoor and open space recreation and for the preservation of the natural scenic and biological resources normally associated with these uses. The project is also supported by the San Diego Coast District of California State Parks. Local nonprofit organizations including WiLDCOAST and the Southwest Interpretive Association are heavily involved in and supportive of the project. (See Exhibit 5)
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of San Diego, San Diego County.
5. **Need:** Postponement could result in additional improvised trails being established through important habitat areas. Conservancy funding would help to formalize an appropriate trail placement and protect sensitive habitat areas.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This trail project will provide a link needed for existing trails within Tijuana River Regional Park to connect to other existing trails and trail systems, including trails located within the Border Field State Park and the National Estuary, as well as the California Coastal Trail. This trail will connect inland communities to the City of Imperial Beach and is an integral link to the South Bay coastal areas of San Diego and Coronado via the Bay Shore Bikeway, which serves as a segment of the regional and statewide California Coastal Trail.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** While in the coastal zone, this project is not expected to be significantly impacted by sea level rise as the project site is located above projected sea level rise elevations.

Additional Criteria

10. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
13. **Readiness:** The County is prepared to begin construction by September, 2013 with a planned completion date of February, 2016.

14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
16. **Cooperation:** The County is a member of the 21 agency Tijuana River Recovery Team which coordinates long range planning, habitat restoration, trail connectivity and capital improvements in the valley. Other members include State Parks, Regional Water Board, Environmental Protection Agency, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Army Corps of Engineers, National Estuary and Research Center as well as numerous non-profits and stakeholder groups. While these additional agencies are not directly involved with this project, they are part of the greater network of trails in the Tijuana River Valley to which this project contributes.
17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The project specifically increases adaptability to climate change, including sea level rise, by incorporating the following design strategies: the use of native materials on trail surfaces; habitat restoration along abandoned trails; and limiting development in the floodplain. Cumulatively these measures serve to protect habitat for species potentially threatened by climate change.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The trail project involves minimal grading with construction equipment. The majority of the trail construction will involve improvements to existing informal trails and will be constructed by the California Conservation Corps (CCC). Where possible, the project will incorporate best management practices to minimize greenhouse gas emissions, such as:
- a) When mechanized equipment is used, idling times and speed limits will be strictly enforced to reduce emissions potential;
 - b) Mechanized equipment will be properly maintained and operated;
 - c) Native and locally sourced materials will be used for trails construction;
 - d) The CCC will use vanpooling for work crews for the duration of the project;
 - e) Plant material that is cleared for the project will be mulched on site or at other regional parks; and
 - f) The project is a link to a trail that provides regional access to other destinations, reducing automotive reliance for transportation to those sites.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES AND OTHER PLANS:

This project is consistent with the “Tijuana River Valley Local Coastal Program Land Use Plan (Plan)” adopted in March of 2007, which incorporates the “Tijuana River Valley Plan (TRV Plan)” of 1977, and Local Coastal Program amendments in 1998 and 1999. This project satisfies the following Overall Goals of the 1977 TRV Plan which are included in the Local Coastal Program – Land Use Plan:

- To provide visual and passive relief from the continuous urbanization for the residents of the Tijuana River Valley;

TIJUANA RIVER VALLEY REGIONAL PARK TRAILS PROJECT: SOUTHWEST TRAILS

- To provide necessary public health and safety facilities and services, including Border Patrol operations, within the public lands portion of the planning area in keeping with the passive use of the natural environment.

The project also satisfies the following goals and objectives of the Multiple Species Conservation Open Space (MSCOS) portion of the Plan:

- Intermix the natural habitat with compatible agricultural, recreational and water quality improvement activities, all functioning in concert to maintain and enhance natural ecosystems and the local quality of life and environment;
- Maintain existing reserve (estuary) and park uses;
- Maintain a buffer around all wetland areas, while accommodating approved trail plans;
- Limit disturbance of natural open space areas to horseback riding, mountain biking and hiking trails and passive recreational uses such as photography, bird watching and nature study that are consistent with preservation of natural resources.

The project is consistent with the following goals and objectives of the Other Community Open Space and Agriculture portion of the Plan:

- Establish an open space system which provides for the preservation of natural resources, the managed production of resources, the provision of outdoor recreation, the protection of public health and safety, and the utilization of the varied terrain and natural drainage systems of the region to guide the form of adjacent urban development;
- Provide a range of opportunities for active and passive recreation in the valley.

The project is also within and compliant with the City of San Diego Multiple Habitat Planning Area (MHPA). In 2011, the project received both a Site Development Permit and a Coastal Development Permit from the City of San Diego.

The proposed trail is supported by and is consistent with the Community Trails Master Plan (CTMP) and the County Trails Program and Regional Trails Plan approved and adopted by the County Board of Supervisors on January 12, 2005. The CTMP was updated on June 24, 2009 and September 23, 2009, respectively.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE CONSERVANCY'S STANDARDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCESSWAY LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT:

The project is consistent with the Coastal Conservancy's Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development. In particular:

Standard No. 1, Protect the Public and Coastal Resources: The accessway design for this project minimizes alterations of natural landforms while protecting against impacts to environmentally sensitive habitats and adjacent private residences. Informal trails not part of the

trail alignment will be closed and fenced. There will be signage to clearly mark off-limit areas to protect sensitive habitats, as well as, to encourage users to stay on the trail.

Standard No. 2, Correct Hazards: This project will not increase the potential of any hazard and will correct potential hazards in the project area. Some areas of dense non-native growth will be cleared for trail construction, reducing fire hazards. Additionally, informal trails that are not part of the trail alignment will be closed and fenced, reducing erosion hazards in the project area.

Standard No. 5, Environmentally Sensitive Areas: The project design includes components such as split log fencing that will protect sensitive habitat within the project area by restricting access to those areas. Where inappropriate access is currently possible, access will be restricted creating a net benefit to environmentally sensitive areas.

Standard No. 8, Trails: This project connects inland units of local park systems to the coast. The project design addresses appropriate drainage and includes access amenities such as trash receptacles, interpretive signage, benches, and barriers to sensitive habitat areas.

Standard No. 13, Barrier-Free Access: The County will be using accessibility design standards established by the “*County Trails Program Community Trails Master Plan.*” The trail improvements will generally be wheelchair-accessible and consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 due to the relatively flat topography of the trail. However, portions of the trail are designated for a “primitive” trail plan and are intended for a more distinct wilderness experience. As such, these “primitive” trails involve a minimal trail width that may limit access to some user groups.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Pursuant to CEQA, the County, as lead agency, prepared the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park (TRVRP) Trails and Habitat Enhancement Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR), and adopted the EIR on December 13, 2006 (Exhibit 3). A notice of determination was filed with the State Clearinghouse on December 13, 2006. No challenges were made to the EIR. The proposed Conservancy authorization requires that the County implement the mitigation measures identified in the Mitigation Reporting and Monitoring Program (Exhibit 4).

The proposed project is a discrete component project of the greater TRVRP Trails and Habitat Enhancement Project. As a responsible agency, the Conservancy is required under CEQA to consider only the potential environmental effects of the project which the Conservancy seeks to approve or fund. The EIR identified potentially significant impacts of the proposed project before the Conservancy only in the area of biological resources. Mitigation measures were proposed and adopted to ensure that these potential impacts are avoided or reduced to less-than-significant levels. The impacts to resources of the proposed project are summarized here:

Biological Resources:

Significant Impacts:

The formalization of informal trails requires that some trails be widened to accommodate multiple uses. In addition some trails will be narrowed. Narrowed trails will be restored along the outer edges, and all restoration activities will be conducted within the trail footprint. Therefore, no impacts are expected due to the narrowing of trails. Implementation of the

proposed project is expected to take place within the existing unimproved trail footprint. However, significant impacts may be possible if trail widening is necessary. While 4 to 6-foot multi-use trails are proposed to be constructed on the existing trail footprint, other existing, informal trails will be closed and signed, and subject to passive restoration. The proposed project location includes habitat occupied by the least Bell's vireo, habitat suitable for the southwestern willow flycatcher and other Multi Species Conservation Plan-covered riparian species such as Cooper's Hawk, as well as for other raptors including Red Shouldered Hawk and White Tailed Kite. Increased use of trails by equestrians, specifically those trails located within the riparian core habitat area, or improper manure management could increase populations of brown-headed cowbirds. The primary invasive wildlife species of concern in the TRVRP is the brown-headed cowbird, which is a nest parasite on least Bell's vireo, other sensitive riparian birds and the California gnatcatcher. In addition, increased use of trails by bicycles might cause some of these trails to degrade more rapidly. Public education will play an important role in mitigating this impact.

As a responsible agency, the Conservancy staff has independently reviewed the County's EIR for the proposed project considered in this staff recommendation. Staff concurs that the project to be funded by the Conservancy, as mitigated, does not have the potential for a significant effect on the environment and recommends that the Conservancy find that there is no substantial evidence that this project, as mitigated, will result in a significant effect on the environment as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Determination for the project.